

WORLD  
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# Laos: The Furtive War

by U.S. Senator  
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*The strange history  
of a war—undeclared,  
undisclosed, and largely  
undiscussed—a war in which  
U.S. involvement  
continues to grow.*

The United States has been involved for more than a decade in an undeclared and largely unnoticed war in northern Laos. From the beginning, and as of today, this war has been characterized by a degree of secrecy never before true of a major American involvement abroad in which many American lives have been lost and billions of American tax dollars spent.

A perversion of the processes of government has been going on, a perversion inimical to our democratic system and to the nation's future.

Who is responsible? The Constitution has been bypassed by a small group of men in various departments of the Executive Branch who, under the direction of four Presidents, initiated and carried out policies without any real Congressional knowledge and thus any true Congressional authorization. Needless to say, these policies were also carried out without the knowledge and approval of the American people, on whose consent our government is supposed to rest.

The war in northern Laos, in which the United States has been a principal party, has been pursued without a declaration of war by the Congress. Moreover, in the past few years, the U.S. government has financed Thai troops fighting in northern Laos despite a clear legislative prohibition against such activity.

It has been possible for successive administrations to ignore the normal processes of government because, until recently, the Executive Branch has succeeded in concealing from the people and the Congress the true facts of our involvement in this little country. As long as Congress and the people did not know what the United States was doing, as long as there was no public debate on the issues involved, Executive Branch policy-makers were free to do as they pleased without having to explain or justify their actions. John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State under President Eisenhower and an arch proponent of the Domino Theory, considered Laos a key domino that then stood between China and North Vietnam on the Communist side and Thailand, Cambodia, and South Vietnam on the free world side.

By an exchange of diplomatic notes in July 1955, the U.S. and the Royal Government of Laos called for economic cooperation and the defense of the Kingdom of Laos. During the late Fifties, U.S. aid to Laos was running \$40-million a year, and 80 per cent of that went to

the support of the Royal Laotian Army.

To guide the Lao Army, the State Department organized an incognito American military mission with headquarters in Vientiane. This group was attached to the U.S. Operations Mission, or more popularly, the PEO. Its members were called technicians and wore civilian clothes. At its head was an equally disguised American general. When the general assumed command of this force his name was erased from the list of active American army officers.

Thus for many years this war was a well-kept secret. When John F. Kennedy became President in 1961, there were 700 American military personnel in Laos as well as 500 Soviet operatives whose mission was to provide logistic support to local Communist forces. These forces included at least 10,000 North Vietnamese.

Soon thereafter, the military position of Royal Lao government forces began to deteriorate whereupon President Kennedy and the Soviet and Chinese leaders entered into negotiations that led to a conference in Geneva. The Geneva Convention recessed when President Kennedy and Chairman Khrushchev met in Vienna and produced a joint statement on Laos in which both parties assured the neutrality and independence of Laos and "recognized the importance of an effective cease fire." In July, what became known as the Geneva agreements of 1962 were signed.

THE GENEVA Agreements prohibited Laos from joining any military alliances, including SEATO, banned the introduction of foreign military personnel and civilians performing quasi-military functions (with the exception of a small French training mission), and forbade the establishment of any foreign military installation in Laos.

After these agreements were signed, the United States and the Soviet Union withdrew their military personnel. The North Vietnamese, however, failed to withdraw most of their forces and advisers.

In the fall of 1962, because of the continuous presence of the North Vietnamese in Laos, the United States agreed to provide Souvanna Phouma, the Prime Minister and leader of the Neutralist faction in the tripartite government, with limited amounts of military equipment as permitted by the Geneva Agreements.

In 1962 the United States began, through the CIA, to support a force of Lao irregulars on the theory that it would be possible to deny officially that the Geneva Agreements were being violated. The decision to use the CIA as the instrument for waging what became a full-scale war was, in my view, a clear pervers-

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sion of that agency's intended role.

With the outbreak of serious hostilities in 1963, the United States secretly began to train Lao pilots and ground crews in Thailand. In June 1964, American tactical fighter bombers began, again secretly, to strike targets in northern Laos far from the Ho Chi Minh Trail area in the south.

When these strikes were reported by the press, the Executive Branch clung to the story, even after it was no longer true, that the United States was flying reconnaissance missions at the request of the Lao government and that our planes were authorized to fire back if they were fired upon.

The United States also began to provide greater amounts of war material and other assistance and to transport Lao supplies and military personnel, using the airplanes and the services of Air America and Continental Air.

In 1965, as the war in South Vietnam intensified, American aircraft began to attack North Vietnamese supply routes in the southern panhandle region of Laos. These attacks were not officially acknowledged until 1970.

In 1966, about fifty U.S. Air Force officers and enlisted men, nominally assigned to the air attaché's office, were stationed at Lao air force bases as advisers to the local command.

In 1967, about the same number of U.S. Army personnel were assigned to

the Lao regional headquarters for similar duty, and about twenty U.S. Air Force pilots stationed in Laos and others stationed in Thailand began to fly as forward air controllers directing tactical aircraft to their targets.

American air attacks on North Vietnam intensified in 1967 and 1968. Following the bombing halt in North Vietnam in 1968, a large part of the U.S. air effort there was redirected at Laos. During this period, the United States installed several navigational aid facilities in Laos, some manned by American Air Force personnel, and U.S. air strikes in Laos increased. By 1969, more than 100 sorties a day were being flown in northern Laos in addition to those being flown over the Ho Chi Minh Trail area in southern Laos, which was considered to be an adjunct of the battlefield in South Vietnam: